**A Jerk**

**by Sidney J. Harris**

I don't know whether history repeats itself, but biography certainly does. The other day, Michael came in and asked me what a "jerk" was--the same question Carolyn put to me a dozen years ago.

At that time, I fluffed her off with some inane answer, such as, "A jerk isn't a very nice person," but both of us knew it was an unsatisfactory reply. When she went to bed, I began trying to work up a suitable definition.

It is a marvelously apt word, of course. Until it was coined, there was really no single word in English to describe the kind of person who is a jerk--"boob" and "simp" were too old hat, and besides they really didn’t fit, for they could be lovable, and a jerk never is.

Thinking it over, I decided that a jerk is basically a person without insight. He is not necessarily a fool or a dope, because some extremely clever persons can be jerks. In fact, it has little to do with intelligence as we commonly think of it; it is, rather, a kind of subtle but persuasive aroma emanating from the inner part of the personality.

I know a college president who can be described only as a jerk. He is not an unintelligent man, nor unlearned, nor even unschooled in the social amenities. Yet he is a jerk *cum laude*, because of a fatal flaw in his nature--he is totally incapable of looking into the mirror of his soul and shuddering at what he sees there.

A jerk, then, is a man (or woman) who is utterly unable to see himself as he appears to others. He has no grace, he is tactless without meaning to be, he is a bore even to his best friends, he is an egotist without charm. All of us are egotists to some extent, but most of us--unlike the jerk--are perfectly and horribly aware of it when we make asses of ourselves. The jerk never knows.